

Why Flash Fiction? Because of a Parrot and a Porn Star, Of Course

In this column, Ashley Chantler, co-director of the International Flash Fiction Association (IFFA), looks back at his path-breaking (and occasionally potholed) essay “Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story.”

By Ashley Chantler

2006

Ten years ago, in 2006, I rather rashly offered to deliver a conference paper titled “The Short-Short Story.”

I was inspired to do so because I was a fan of the 101-worders in Dan Rhodes’s *Anthropology and a Hundred Other Stories* (2000), particularly “Innocence”:

I thought my beautiful fiancée was innocence itself until I met her parrot. She had taught it to say terrible things. Wank. Minge. Fist fuck. Stick it up your Jap’s eye. I was disillusioned to find she had taken such delight in training an unknowing bird to swear. My love diminished, but I didn’t cancel the wedding. The parrot was in the church. When the man asked whether anyone knew a reason for us not to marry, it squawked, “Cunt flaps.” My bride bent double with laughter, and even though we made our vows I knew that the marriage was over.¹

I also liked some of the 55-worders in Steve Moss and John M. Daniel’s anthology *The World’s Shortest Stories of Love and Death* (1999), especially Shannon O’Rourke’s “Easy Come, Easy Go” (about which, more soon). I figured that writing the paper would help me better understand the short-short story form. It did – sort of.

A year or so after the conference, I developed my paper into an essay, “Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story,” which was published in *The Short Story* (2009), edited by Ailsa Cox. My (necessarily hasty) research discovered eighteen anthologies and collections, which I listed in a section titled “Towards a Bibliography of the Short-Short Story” (my repeated use of “Towards,” stolen from T. S. Eliot, was a cunning attempt to pre-empt charges of incompleteness). I suspected that there could have been more, but the essay was overdue. I’d listed everything that Google had to offer and I had teaching preparation to do.

2016

At the conference, it was pleasing (relieving) that my audience, like me, knew very little about short-short stories. (After I’d delivered my paper, a professor of creative writing, perhaps feeling the need to say something, asked if all short-shorts are misogynistic. The parrot had not amused.) If I delivered the paper today, I could cut the explanations of what a short-short is and get to the close reading much sooner.

In 2007, I edited *An Anatomy of Chester: A Collection of Short-Short Stories*.

In 2008, I founded, with my colleague Peter Blair, *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, which has established itself as the world's leading periodical of quality short-short stories and serious reviews of flash-fiction anthologies, collections, novels, guidebooks, and critical studies.

We have been interviewed by Grant Faulkner for *100 Word Story* and have published interviews of two of Britain's leading flashers, David Gaffney and Vanessa Gebbie.

In 2015, we launched *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Press* with the publication of David Swann's *Stronger Faster Shorter: Flash Fictions*, followed soon after by Meg Tuite's *Lined Up Like Scars: Flash Fictions*. We also founded, in 2015, the International Flash Fiction Association (IFFA). We run the National Flash Fiction Youth Competition, and have been judges on several other competitions. We have given readings at various venues and talks to several schools. Our own flashes have been published in anthologies and magazines.

We teach flash fiction on the BA and MA Creative Writing programmes at the University of Chester.

At Chester, we have also established the Flash Fiction Special Collection, the world's largest archive of short-short anthologies, collections, magazines, and secondary texts. My 2009 essay listed eighteen books in its bibliography; the collection, to date, has swelled to nearly 500.

In the light of the vastly increased popularity of flash fiction and what I now know about the form, I am going to return to "Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story," quoting from it and offering updated responses.

"Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story":

"Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story" began as "The Short-Short Story." Beginnings are often optimistic. In the middle of my research, feeling pessimistic and mortal after reading so much brevity, I placed "Notes Towards a Definition of the Short-Short Story" at the top of the page. Blankness was to follow. A Tristram Shandy-esque essay? A Dave Eggers-esque short story?² Both? I did not know, but of course had to, Unnamable-like, go on, to fill the page, to banish the silence for better or worse.

What follows, then, is "Notes Towards the ...," a study of the short-short story tinged with the optimism that "The Short-Short Story" might one day be written and the pessimism that it will not be by me.

Response:

Since my essay, much has been written about flash fiction. Read together, the following constitute a very good "The Short-Short Story: A Survey of the Form":

Blair, Peter, "Flash Fiction," in *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook 2016* (2015).
 Casto, Pamelyn, "Flash Fiction," in *Books and Beyond: The Greenwood Encyclopedia of New American Reading: Volume 2: E–M*, ed. Kenneth Womack (2008).
 Hazuka, Tom, "The Short-Short Story," in *Behind the Short Story: From First to Final Draft*, ed. Ryan G. Van Cleave and Todd James Pierce (2007).
 Masih, Tara L., "Introduction," in *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*, ed. Tara L. Masih (2009).
 Shapard, Robert, "The Remarkable Reinvention of Very Short Fiction," *World Literature Today*, 86.5 (2012); online.
 Williams, Tony, "Flash Fiction," in *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, ed. Steve Earnshaw, second edition (2014).

"Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story":

The short-short boom [in the 1980s] was a sign of the times, as is the form's increasing popularity: the internet buzzes with numerous e-zines, websites, forums and blogs containing short-shorts, no doubt because they are perfect for the emailing, texting, abbreviating, ADD generation. For the (ephemeral) short-short, the future's orange.

Response:

This is still correct, though it does sound a bit dated. Do we still refer to "e-zines"? My students don't share their flashes by email, favouring Facebook. There's no mention of Twitter.

It is now impossible to keep up with all of the flash-fiction anthologies and collections that are being published, let alone all the online magazines. This is a good thing.

I'm not sure about my reference to the "ADD generation." The kids are all right – they are multi-tasking. Lol.

Several social-media-initiated flash-fiction collections have appeared in print, among them:

Beach, Lou, *420 Characters* (2012); first published on Facebook.
 Hill, Sean, *Very Short Stories: 300 Bite-Size Works of Fiction* (2012); first published on Twitter.
 Thay, Jacque, *Twictions: 140 Stories Each Told in 140 Characters* (2010).

If you *really* want to read one, choose Lou Beach's. Sean Hill can be quite amusing, but Twitter fiction is severely limited and often inclines towards jokes.

"Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story":

There seems to be [...] no difference between a flash and a sudden, other than the word count, so why have two terms? To give the short-short form some sort of

stability, it would be helpful if editors and authors dispensed with all the different terms³ and just used “short-short” [...].

Response:

“Flash fiction” has become the most popular term for stories of no more than c. 750 words.

A prediction: “sudden fiction” will become a term referred to only in critical studies of short-short stories that consider Robert Shapard and James Thomas’s *Sudden Fiction* anthologies.

Some authors (Vanessa Gebbie and Robert Scotellaro, for example) use “micro fiction” to differentiate their very short flashes from their flashes. Fair enough – we know what they mean.

“Drabbles” (stories of exactly 100 words) are now an established form under the “flash fiction” umbrella. I recommend Grant Faulkner’s *Fissures: One Hundred 100-Word Stories* (2015) and his online magazine, edited with Lynn Mundell and Beret Olsen, *100 Word Story*.

I don’t know if “dribbles” (stories of exactly 50 words) will be written about in the future – they might be mentioned in a footnote. Most dribbles aren’t very good. I’m still waiting for an impressive collection.

“Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story”:

According to [James Thomas], the “success” of short-short stories “depends not on their length but on their depth, their clarity of vision, their human significance – the extent to which the reader is able to recognize in them the real stuff of real life”.⁴

Response:

I still agree. Which is why I think dribbles and other micro micros are often limited.

“Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story”:

Brevity, when done well, leaves potentially productive narrative “gaps”⁵ (more so than in the traditional short story), and I will suggest in the next part [...] that the best short-shorts are those where the reader is prompted to question and to write the unwritten. [...]

What follows are two short-shorts from *The World’s Shortest Stories of Love and Death*. The first, D. Ray Ramsey’s “The Lifeguard,” is an example of a limited short-short; the second, Shannon O’Rourke’s “Easy Come, Easy Go,” shows the short-short’s potential. They are each fifty-five words.

I eyed that chick all summer and she never looked my way. Strutting around the pool, twitching her butt, adjusting her top, drinking Cokes, ignoring me ... Then one morning, she almost drowned. I blew my whistle, dove. As I carried her out, she squirted water in my eye and laughed, "Thought you'd never notice me!"⁶

She'd zealously guarded her virginity, so he'd stood her up on Prom Night. Years later, he's come downtown to see her new film. Now, he watches her image on the screen, realizing his mistake. She has undeniable talent. He should've stood by her. Suddenly, the screen goes dark. He searches his pockets for more quarters.⁷

"The Lifeguard" contains "1) a setting; 2) a character or characters; 3) conflict; and 4) resolution,"⁸ but it is not very stimulating imaginatively. The narrator's use of the derogatory "chick" suggests something about him, as does her look-at-me "Strutting," but there is little else to interest, except perhaps the ambiguity as to whether or not the narrator works out she feigned drowning. In the spirit of generosity, one might argue that the story is shallow intentionally because it is about the shallowness of 1990s American middle-class youth, but there is no evidence to support this.

John L'Heureux has written that "a really good short-short, whatever else it may be, is a story we can't help reading fast, and then re-reading, and again, but no matter how many times we read it, we're not quite through it yet."⁹ On these terms, "The Lifeguard" is not "a really good short-short." "Easy Come, Easy Go," however, perhaps is because it prompts questions due to gaps in the text: Why did she guard her virginity? Does "zealously," with its connection to "zealot," imply she did so because of strict religious beliefs? (He is also a zealot in his uncompromising pursuit of sex.) If so, and perhaps even if not, how did she end up as a supposedly talented porn star? (What is her "talent" and is it "undeniable"? The shift in point of view is subtle and effective.) Did his standing her up have something to do with her transformation? What has happened to him in the intervening years? He could still be single, or with a partner who lacks "talent," but is he seedy (sordid, prurient; he is probably bursting with seed)? He goes "downtown to see her new film," which suggests a special journey, but he might have seen her previous films at other venues or on video. She is not a virgin; is he? "He should've stood by her" (rather than want to lie with her all those years ago), but who is to say that she would have developed "undeniable talent" if he had? Perhaps she would have converted him (the story is, in part, about transformation); perhaps he would have eventually made her drop her guard, for better or worse.

The best short-short writers know that what is unsaid is as important as what is said. One might be able to speak, but being silent can be productive: into the silences the reader speaks, and thus lengthens the short-short. As Paul Theroux has said, a short-short can contain a novel.¹⁰

Response:

I still agree with all of this. "Easy Come, Easy Go" is a perfect flash. I'm a big fan of Dan Rhodes's "Innocence," but O'Rourke's flash made me ponder the potential of the form.

When asked what my favourite flash of all time is, I used to say “Easy Come, Easy Go,” and also mention David Gaffney’s *Sawn-Off Tales* (2006; “Pop-Tarts,” in particular, is wonderfully dark). If the questioner had time, I’d now also encourage them to read, among others, Robert Olen Butler, Lydia Davis, Holly Howitt, Vanessa Gebbie, Etgar Keret, Robert Scotellaro, Ana María Shua, David Swann, Tony Williams, and Barry Yourgrau. In the future, I hope to recommend collections by *Flash* magazine authors Jonathan Cardew, Michael Loveday, David Steward, and Kevin Tosca.

Now, I have a new favourite. It is a masterpiece. Michael Buckingham-Gray’s “And Brings Up Loose Dirt”:

He kneels in front of the cabin. He thrusts his long fingers into the ground, and brings up loose dirt. The sun illuminates him as he digs. He strikes something hard, and pulls out a potato. He places it in front of him like a prize. He plunges a hand back into the earth. A shadow casts over him. He gets to his feet and tilts his head upward: nothing but blue sky. He considers going into town. But he may see the mayor. More than once the elected official has taken him aside and congratulated him on the polished redwood dining tables he used to make. Then the mayor asks why the business shut down. Each time, he fails to respond. He kneels in front of the cabin. He thrusts his long fingers into the ground, and brings up loose dirt.¹¹

I could re-read it, and admire it, and envy Buckingham-Gray, every day.

“Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story”:

The shorter the work, the longer the rope to hang yourself. The problem for the writer of the isolated short-short is that you are judged on the one piece. Read within a single-authored collection, though, the reader is likely to be more forgiving, in the same way that a reader will probably forgive a novelist for a clunky sentence or dull paragraph, perhaps even a tedious chapter or two, so long as the work as a whole works: entertains, stimulates, informs, humours, saddens, intrigues, *involves* ...

Response:

I like to think, even though I now sigh when sitting down, that I can still be so insightful.

Conclusion

For the conclusion of “Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story,” I wrote a flash about points of view that alluded to Ford Madox Ford’s points-of-view-obsessed novel *The Good Soldier* (1915). It’s not one of my best short-shorts, but it works in context, if the reader gets the allusion ... There are gaps – and there are gaps.

I don't know how to conclude this essay, beyond thanking Virgie and Annie and *SmokeLong* for allowing me to do some pondering on flash fiction, a form that is even more exciting now than it was in 2006.

References

¹I am grateful to Liz Milne for her editorial suggestions.

Dan Rhodes, *Anthropology and a Hundred Other Stories* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2010), p. 37; reprinted by permission of the publisher.

²Dave Eggers's "There Are Some Things He Should Keep to Himself" is five blank pages; see *How We Are Hungry* (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 201-06.

³In the essay, I wrote: "'Short-short' is an umbrella term that covers: micro fiction; flash fiction; sudden fiction; postcard fiction; minute fiction; drabble; byte; ficlet; 55 fiction; 69er; nano fiction; furious fiction; fast fiction; quick fiction; and skinny fiction. Micro fiction, flash fiction and sudden fiction are the most common terms."

⁴James Thomas, "Introduction," in *Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories*, ed. James Thomas, Denise Thomas and Tom Hazuka (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 12.

⁵Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" (first published in *New Literary History*, 3 (1972)), in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge and Nigel Wood, second edition (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), p. 193.

⁶D. Ray Ramsey, "The Lifeguard," in *The World's Shortest Stories of Love and Death*, ed. Steve Moss and John M. Daniel (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1999), p. 26; reprinted by permission of the publisher.

⁷Shannon O'Rourke, "Easy Come, Easy Go," in *The World's Shortest Stories of Love and Death*, p. 28; reprinted by permission of the publisher.

⁸Steve Moss and John M. Daniel, "How to Write a 55-Word Story," in *The World's Shortest Stories of Love and Death*, p. 217.

⁹John L'Heureux, "Afterwords: The Tradition," in *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*, ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1986), p. 228.

¹⁰Paul Theroux, "Afterwords: The Tradition," in *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*, p. 228.

¹¹Michael Buckingham-Gray, "And Brings Up Loose Dirt," *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, 7.1 (Apr. 2014), 20; reprinted by permission of the publisher.

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<http://www.chester.ac.uk/flash.fiction>